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Preventing college plans from melting away



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Students who graduate from high school with a college acceptance in hand are seen to have “made it.” Yet new research is revealing that fewer students than we might expect complete the enrollment process and start their post-secondary education in the fall.

What happens during the summer after high school graduation to prevent college matriculation, especially among low-income students? The National Summer Learning Association (NSLA) spoke with researchers **Benjamin Castleman** and **Lindsay Page** to learn more about the challenge of “summer melt,” and what we can do to prevent it.

What led you to study this issue? A decade ago, Ben Castleman was a high school administrator in Rhode Island, interested in learning what happened to his students after they graduated. “We assumed that the kids who got into college were matriculating, but in following up with them, we found that wasn’t always the case.” Research led by Dr. Karen Arnold at Boston College started to document the “summer melt” phenomenon and the array of challenges that students face during the summer between high school and college. We wanted to learn more about this drop-off problem and how it affected low-income students in particular.

What data did you gather to study summer melt? We use several data sources to understand this issue broadly and at the individual student level. Working with uAspire, a Boston-based nonprofit organization focused on issues of college affordability and success, we put together a snapshot of where students intended to matriculate and whether they actually enrolled. We were able to observe enrollment by connecting data from uAspire to data from the National Student Clearinghouse, which provide student-level information on whether and where students enroll in college.

To examine the extent of summer melt at the national level, we used the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 to track applications, acceptances, and financial aid package submissions. This let us study the relationship between college-going plans and activities and socio-economic status across a larger data set.

How prevalent did you find summer melt to be?

Among the college-intending uAspire students, we estimate that 22 percent of the lowest-income youth failed to enroll in college in the fall term immediately following their high school graduation. Using eligibility for Pell grants as a benchmark, we found that students of a lower SES were more likely to melt than their higher SES peers. We also found that the melt rate was even higher for students bound for community college — nearly 40 percent. These rates of summer melt should be a concern for policymakers who are looking at community colleges as a strategy to address college affordability and workforce development.

Why do students melt? What challenges must students navigate in the transition to college?

Even after students are accepted to college, they face an intricate array of tasks to complete over the summer. Completing financial aid forms are a critical step that triggers other enrollment processes like housing and tuition payments, yet few students can tackle on their own complex processes like income and asset verification on a financial aid application. During this transitional summer, students are falling through a gap in the support pipeline: they are no longer part of their high school community, but they have not been



fully absorbed by their college's system. College bridge programs only serve a limited number of students and focus more on academic performance and persistence. Low-income students who rely on school-based counseling support during the school year often have no one to turn to for help during the summer. Few 18-year-olds have the self-advocacy skills to navigate complex college bureaucracies. They are more hesitant to proactively reach out to their intended college or to community-based resources for help. Compounding the problem, many financial aid and admissions offices are understaffed, and may therefore lack the staff capacity to offer students needed individualized support.

What about a student's family? Can't they fill this gap in the pipeline? Even the students and families who were highly motivated and successful in high school can melt without professional support during this critical summer. A first-time college family may not be aware of the volume of financial and procedural tasks students are required to complete over the summer. A summer visit to relatives in the student's home country can cause a pileup of mail and missed deadlines from the college, which a first-time family wouldn't know to expect. Similarly, when a family's financial circumstances change unexpectedly, they may struggle to locate old tax returns or negotiate a new financial package with the school, or even if this is possible. The reality is that many families expect their high school graduates to take on adult responsibilities, and students are left to face these challenges with minimal support.

Describe the melt prevention activities that were tested in your research. In one study, uAspire advisors provided regular, proactive outreach to students throughout the summer. They focused on supporting students to meet financial aid and other enrollment deadlines, like completing housing forms, placement tests, and course selections that colleges require for matriculation. Counselors used several methods to contact students, including phone, email, text, and Facebook. A control group was told counselors were available to them, and while they were never denied services, these students did not receive proactive outreach. In this study, we found a 20 percent reduction in summer melt among the treatment group, with greatest returns for low-income students.

One lesson we took from this summer intervention was that text messaging was among the best strategies for connecting and communicating with students. This lesson inspired our intervention the following summer where we utilized a combination of automated text outreach and free-form advisor-student text-based interaction to support students in the transition to college. We similarly found this to be an effective way to support on-time college enrollment at a fraction of the cost of counselor-based outreach. Specifically, this intervention cost approximately \$7 per student served, inclusive of the cost of staff time. The texting strategy holds a lot of promise where there is a dearth of accessible college-going supports in the community or at the school.

Preventing Summer Melt at Scale

Newer research is testing how to bring summer transition support to scale through partnerships between states and universities, using a text messaging strategy.

The state of Delaware piloted a program to use government FAFSA contact and filing information to customize text messages to over half of Delaware high school seniors according to where students are in the enrollment process.

The program sends students prompts, links, and deadlines to complete the next step in the financial aid process, asks if they need help, and directs them to live support for that step. The program also asks students for permission to transfer the communications stream from the state team to the staff at their intended college, so interaction and support can continue to matriculation as students seamlessly transfer from high school to college.

What about kids without a cell phone? Is there a digital divide challenge here? No, the Pew Research Center has found that the penetration of cell technology is pervasive across income lines. The greater challenge is developing the access points to sign students up for a texting campaign, such as adding a checkbox to college entrance exams, providing students an opt-in number to sign up via text, or embedding an opt-in within loan or college applications. We have also found that campaigns are most effective when we are able to describe them in a way that students believe is credible and useful. Coordination is important too, so students are not confused by outreach from multiple organizations and agencies.

What additional lessons have emerged that may boost college matriculation and persistence? The issues behind summer melt start before students graduate from high school and persist into their college years. Targeted support should begin when students apply for financial aid in the winter of their senior year. Using similar strategies once enrolled will help them persist through common challenges for college freshman, such as FAFSA refile and maintaining academic standing. These supports could have an especially large impact on traditionally low community college persistence rates. We focus a lot on financial aid support but there is value also in actively connecting students to the variety of academic and social resources on their campus.

What happens to students who don't matriculate as planned? Do they eventually make it to college? Other research shows that delayed enrollment, even by one semester, increases the risk that a student will drop out of college before receiving a degree. Studies interviewing low-income college-intending students who failed to matriculate as planned have found that a year later nearly half of respondents were unemployed, and those who were often held low-wage service-industry jobs with little prospect for advancement. The tremendous promise of these students may never be realized.

What data is needed to continue this research and refinement of support strategies? There are a number of steps that students typically need to take in the summer prior to college enrollment. Many colleges already have data systems that would allow them to track and act on students' successful completion of these steps. Better access to this information – or colleges acting on this information – could help to mitigate summer melt. A host of research questions go beyond the basic question of enrollment. We would like to learn more about the quality of students' college experiences: their coursework, their satisfaction with various support strategies, and their post-college employment.

What do policymakers and practitioners need to know about preventing summer melt and improving college-going rates among low-income students? First, summer melt doesn't begin in the summer. The critical entry point for support is when students start applying for financial aid, and we need to gear students up for the transition to college throughout their senior year, when they are still a captive audience, to make sure that they are prepared and that they use that summer productively. Second, if we want high school counselors to do transition support work in the summer, they need to have 12-month contracts, a budgetary change for many school districts. Policymakers could look at strategically integrating these summer melt prevention strategies into broader college access programs for greater impact and return. Finally, it's important to remember that it's not sufficient for counselors to set up shop and say "we are here if you want to come see us." A passive strategy is not enough. It's the proactive outreach with tailored content that reaches students directly that matters.

References: Castleman, B. L. & Page, L. C. (2014). *Summer melt: Supporting low-income students through the transition to college*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.



The vision of the National Summer Learning Association (NSLA) is for every child to be safe, healthy, and engaged in learning during the summer. To realize that vision, our mission is to connect and equip schools, providers, communities, and families to deliver high-quality summer learning opportunities to our nation's youth to help close the achievement gap and support healthy development.

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